

UNMASKING JESUS

Peter Parker is the world's most unlikely superhero. Peter is a shy and nerdy high school student, the proverbial 98-pound-weakling. On a field trip to a science lab, Peter is bitten by an escaped genetically designed "super spider." The spider's bite adds the spider's DNA to Peter's human DNA. He develops a strange set of super-powers. He gradually discovers and masters these powers – enhanced strength and agility, the ability to stick to and climb walls, and the ability to shoot webs from his wrists. Peter also develops perfect vision and a precognitive "spider sense" that alerts him to danger.

Peter decides to use his new powers to earn some much-needed money. His Uncle Ben tells Peter, "Remember, with great power comes great responsibility." Peter does not listen to this wisdom, however, until after his uncle is killed. Peter hunts down and discovers the identity of the killer. He is the robber Peter could easily have stopped earlier, before his uncle had been killed, but Peter had refused to take responsibility. Peter blames himself for his uncle's death, and he vows to use his powers for the good of others. He then develops his dual identity as both Peter Parker and the masked Spider-Man in a red-and-blue suit.¹

The Jesus we encounter today in our Palm Sunday reading from the Gospel of Mark is quite a lot like this fictional every-man, Peter Parker, the reluctant superhero. Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem is his unmasking, the revelation of *his* true identity. This is when he begins to reveal to the world the *true* nature of their Messiah.

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Imagine the uproar in Jerusalem that day! People had heard that the messiah was coming to town. The crowds had come out to see what this great warrior looked like, this long-awaited superhero who would vanquish the Roman foe and restore the kingdom of Israel as an independent nation. They even greeted Jesus as they would greet a king² or a war hero, carrying palm branches and shouting, "Hosanna! Save us!"³

And yet, here comes Jesus – riding not on some grand stallion, but on the back of a donkey. And his army? A ragtag bunch of workingmen from the backwaters of the country.

It's easy to see how the people of Jerusalem could have so quickly become disillusioned with their superhero. Jesus didn't fit their picture of a conquering messiah. He didn't turn out to be the man they wanted him to be. He didn't wear the superhero mask they tried to force upon him. Within a few short days, the crowds will turn on Jesus, offering up his life in exchange for that of a convict.

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On Good Friday we'll hear the Passion story according to John. The Jesus in John is much more like Superman. Like Christ, Superman was sent to Earth by his father to lead by example. Aside from being about as morally pure as one can be, Superman possesses godlike abilities: Jesus could walk on water, something Superman could do as well. Toward the end of the movie, Superman is stabbed in the side with a piece of kryptonite, a metaphor for Jesus' stabbing during the Crucifixion. Later, after after hurling Lex Luthor's continent into space, Superman falls to Earth in a pose that is unmistakably that of Jesus on the cross. Finally, Superman wakes from a coma after three days, analogous to Christ's "awakening" three days following his cricifixion. The director of the Superman movie has not hidden the fact that his version of Superman was intended to be a Christ figure.⁴

But the Jesus we encounter in the Gospel of Mark is much more like our everyman Peter Parker. He's the reluctant hero. He knows he's been gifted for a special purpose, yet he sometimes struggles with what he is required to do in order to fulfill that purpose. We see that best in Mark's account of Jesus praying in the garden of Gethsemane.

According to John, Jesus willingly goes to the cross. But it is in Mark that we hear Jesus tell his disciples, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake." And we're told that Jesus "threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him," saying, "Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want."⁵

It is in these moments – his triumphal entry into Jerusalem not as a conquering hero, but as a humble servant, and in his prayer in the garden, Jesus' prayer of humble submission – that we see the true face of our reluctant hero. No, he's not the messiah the people were expecting.

I suspect Jesus is not the hero any of us expect. We want a hero who will save us from experiencing pain. But Jesus is not the superhero who will conquer all the villains that assail us daily in this life. *That's* the kind of superhero we often want. One author “maintains that the typical American paradigm of the Messiah is not Jesus, but Superman. We don't want a savior who does a stupid thing like rising from the dead. We want one who never dies.”⁶

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It is St. Paul, in today's reading from Philipians, that shows us the true face of our Messiah:

Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God,

did not regard equality with God

as something to be exploited,

but emptied himself,

taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

he humbled himself

and became obedient to the point of death –

even death on a cross.⁷

This is the true face of our Messiah. Jesus unmasked.

Jesus, the everyman.

Jesus, the reluctant superhero.

Jesus, who shows us the the true face of the Messiah – not conquering hero, but humble servant.

Jesus – the real, suffering and dying Messiah who promises life on the other side of pain.

Jesus, whose own exultation in resurrection and lordship over all magnifies the glory of God – and honor given to him, not one that he sought to grasp on his own.⁸

Jesus, the Messiah who vanquishes our *ultimate* foes: sin and death.

Amen.

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¹ Mark D. Stucky, “Unmasking the Spirituality of Spider-Man” at <http://www.cinemaspirit.info/spiderman.htm>, downloaded 4/4/09.

² 2 Kings 9:13

³ cf. 1 Maccabees 13:49-52, 2 Maccabees 10:1-8

⁴ “Five Christ Figures as Depicted in Science Fiction/Fantasy Movies,” <http://unrealitymag.com/index.php/2009/02/18/five-christ-figures-as-depicted-in-science-fictionfantasy-movies/>, downloaded 4/4/09.

⁵ Mark 14:34-36

⁶ Robert Farrar Capon, *Hunting the Divine Fox: Images and Mystery in Christian Faith* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1985) cited in Brian Stoffregen, “Palm Sunday: Exegetical Notes,” at <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/palmsun.htm>, downloaded 4/4/09.

⁷ Philippians 2:5-8

⁸ Mark Vitalis Hofmann, *New Proclamation, Year B: Advent through Lent, 2005-2006* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 209.